

May 2013 extended essay reports

ENGLISH A

Overall grade boundaries

Grade:	A	B	C	D	E
Mark range:	29-36	23-28	16 - 22	8-15	0-7

The range and suitability of the work submitted

This year in all three Categories examiners saw a number of outstanding essays from candidates who had made fresh and original choices of texts and topic.

Noteworthy examples of Category 1 and 2 topics included the motif of machinery in *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*, the concept of home and homelessness in *Burnt Shadows*; self sacrifice in *A Tale of Two Cities* and *Les Misérables*; and the role of fate in *Never Let Me Go* - along with, encouragingly, several enterprising and sensitive studies of Shakespeare plays.

Essays on well-worn themes and topics (*1984*, *A Handmaid's Tale* and other dystopian novels; Jane Austen) are still prevalent and supervisors could still guide students towards more adventurous choices of texts and topics.

Candidates should be mindful that they may be limiting themselves by choosing children's literature (such as Jacques' *Redwall* series); in such cases, as good as the text(s) might be, they are not always rich enough to support a 'full-blown' literary analysis".

Recent young adult fiction was also strongly represented in the total sample. Meyer's *Twilight* series and Collins' *Hunger Games* were popular choices but, despite obvious enthusiasm and enjoyment on the part of the candidates, the literary treatment was often thin. Supervisors perhaps need to caution candidates that writing about a text which they profess to 'love' often turns out to be an effusive treatment lacking critical discrimination – the EE is, afterall a research investigation, and not solely a personal interest or description of a life-long "passion".

In terms of Category 3 essays, elements in both the Literature or the Language and Literature course can teach candidates how to analyze film, games, advertisements and the range of other sources they can choose to write about (see further comments later in this report).

Candidates who floundered often did so less from topic selection than from their inability to handle the topic with strong supporting research and well-developed argumentation. It is perhaps self-evident that the skills of analyzing the text types chosen as the basis of the essay were dependent on how these had been presented and discussed in class during the course.

The best essays offered a connection between the cultural context of mass media (e.g. a comparison of news reports of a historic event, or a comparison of different media on the treatment of that event). On the other hand, broad questions such as on the theme of politically correct language make it difficult for students to organize and focus their comments.

Candidate performance against each criterion

Criterion A: research question

With every passing year it becomes increasingly evident that the connection between the quality of the RQ and the quality of the finished essay is a key issue: the clearer the question, the clearer the paper.

Successful research questions tended to have a relatively narrow focus and thus lent themselves to detailed exploration and analysis within the word count. Noteworthy examples of these included “A reticent and deceptive narrator: an examination of the narrative voice of Lucy Snowe in *Villette*” and “How and to what effect does Eliot portray the marriages in *Middlemarch* as imperfect?”.

Where the research question was presented as a statement rather than a question, there was a tendency for the candidate simply to list examples to illustrate or “prove” this statement, and thus however diligent the research, in such cases it was quite difficult to award marks above 2 for criteria D, E and F. Examples of this included a study of the depiction of wolves in *White Fang* and a discussion of the parallels between the characters in *Animal Farm* and the Russian Revolution.

In the same way, a title simply framed to illustrate the similarities and differences between two texts, is particularly prone to this kind of listing.

Indeed, students who chose to use two or more works seldom seemed to have a justification for the comparison – those that did, usually did well on analysis; those that did not tended to fall back on description and plot narration. Odd pairings of works occurred - sometimes apparently the result of an effort to find something written originally in English to compare with a translated work (one candidate compared a Japanese Manga comic to Coventry Patmore’s *An Angel in the House*).

There were also some comparative papers which were really two separate essays roughly attached to each other (*On the Road* and *Pride and Prejudice*; *Macbeth* and *Harry Potter*) where, again, candidates needed to identify some rationale for the choice of the two works.

There was a range of successful essays where this has been intelligently done, such as “In what ways, and to what purpose, do Nabokov’s *Invitation of a Beulah*, *Invitation of a Beulah* and Proust’s *The Way by Swann*’s evoke memories of childhood?”.

Overly broad titles rarely work because of a lack of focus and a lack of detailed treatment within the confines of the word count

Criterion B: introduction

Some candidates needed to delineate the introduction more clearly. Where this had been done in the Table of Contents it was easy to establish where the introduction ended and the main body of the discussion began, but more often than one might expect, the introduction apparently rambled on for two or three sides and it was left to the examiner to guess where to stop reading and take stock in terms of awarding a mark for B.

Criterion C: investigation

In terms of “choosing appropriate material” there was a range of essays, from those which claimed not to have consulted any secondary source material to those which were heavily over-reliant on critical reading.

In the worst case, certain characters were illustrated not with evidence from novels but by assertions about his character traits gleaned from secondary sources such as Sparknotes. Some papers made almost no direct reference to the text, but had numerous quotations from secondary sources as a substitute.

One examiner commented that “research is too many times limited to what comes up first on Google” and candidates need to be carefully coached in evaluating internet sources (see further comments below).

The ubiquity of Spark Notes and Cliff Notes tends to mean that candidates offer only details about plot and surface character traits and thus (once again) produce factual or descriptive commentaries.

Nevertheless, this being said, many students had learned to navigate databases and university library sites and used other methods of finding excellent sources outside of their school or local library.

Criterion D: knowledge and understanding of the topic studied

Candidates often demonstrated a confident ownership of their chosen subject and an evident personal engagement in the research.

Criterion E: reasoned argument

It was clear that many students were unsure how to develop a clear, persuasive argument. Many essays were fragmented and lacked coherence. This is also an area which would benefit from appropriate practice in class.

Where a candidate was able to present a logical argument of analysis with precise text reference and use of literary language, the paper immediately moved into a higher scoring.

As mentioned earlier under criterion A, the listing of evidence to illustrate or prove a case often led to candidates retelling the story in an attempt to make the point. Listing was evident also in the choice of quotations: candidates could give more attention to integrating quotations more fluently, explaining their significance and why they were chosen to illustrate a particular point in the discussion.

Sub-headings often detract from the fluency of the essay as they rarely replace clearly worded transitions from one point to the next.

Criterion F: application of analytical and evaluative skills appropriate to the subject

The single most important fault in many essays was the tendency for candidates to describe, narrate, summarize, or explain instead of analyzing.

Marks were generally higher where the investigation had been framed in such a way as to keep the analysis away from lapsing into mere “storytelling” – as suggested in the section on criteria A and E above. Successful research questions with an overt stress on literary technique worked well: e.g. “What is the role and significance of the fragmented narrative in Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*?” or “In what ways can the voices created in Ted Hughes’ *Birthday Letters* and Sylvia Plath’s *Ariel* be described as confessional?”. In such essays it was clear that the advice on p. 25 of the Extended Essay Guide that “how texts work as literature” should be the key approach in the treatment of the topic had been carefully noted.

One particularly dubious approach tended to involve flattery of the writer (in statements such as “The author does an excellent job in.....”) which often stood instead of illustrating this literary feature through careful analysis of well-chosen examples.

Criterion G: use of language appropriate to the subject

Generally language reached the level of at least “sometimes clear and appropriate” although there were more than a few scripts where the reader had to struggle to grasp what was being said. More often than not, this was not because the candidate’s command of English per se was poor, but because expression was garbled or overly flowery and thus the overall communication of ideas was impeded. Lazy expression was also prevalent.

Criterion H: conclusion

The conclusion should connect back to the introduction in order to frame the essay in an appropriate manner. Care must be taken in the conclusion to reflect the ideas that were developed in the body of the paper.

Criterion I: formal presentation

In terms of presentation, arguably an easy category in which to score well, candidates lost marks through lack of attention to simple details (for example, omitting to paginate the essay; missing out a contents page; omitting citations or failing to link them to the bibliography/reference page; misspelling authors' names). Supervisors should make sure that the candidate knows how to write an abstract and do citations, integrate quotations and write a bibliography.

Footnotes appeared to pose a particular problem. Almost no candidate employed "ibid" and "op.cit", instead simply re-copying the title, etc. over and over – even when it was the primary text being used as the subject of the essay.

Italicizing or underlining titles is also necessary, especially when the title of the novel and the protagonist are the same (Emma, Hamlet, Jane Eyre, etc) which can result in some confusion in the discussion.

Some examiners commented that paragraphing was becoming a lost art – and yet this is often important when structuring an essay in order to lead the reader through a complex argument.

The importance of editing and proofreading can never be emphasized enough.

Criterion J: abstract

Candidates should write the abstract after completion of the essay--abstracts using the future tense ("the essay will show...") give the impression that they are introductory.

Criterion K: holistic judgment

Many essays represented a sophisticated level of understanding and research which would have been a credit to a tertiary level student. These were a pleasure to read and were well rewarded under this criterion.

Candidate performance against each criterion: essays submitted under category 3

Whilst many of the remarks above apply equally well to Category 3 essays, the following additional comments are offered on selected criteria:

Criterion A: research question

Many topics had potential but were quite general and vague, for example, "What makes a successful political campaign?" "How influential is the media in shaping the adolescent view of beauty?" or "How has Western society influenced rock-and-roll lyrics during the 1950's and 1960's?"

These tended to encourage students to simply write about their ideas and opinions without doing research or providing evidence for their statements.

Effective research questions were often framed /phrased in a way as to invite analysis such as "With reference to their recent campaigns, to what extent do the advertising techniques of Benetton and Coca-Cola reflect the companies' values and ideology?" or "How does the Think! Drink-driving

campaign use mass media in order to educate the public and convey a message?" Another successful essay was on Sign Language where the candidate argued that sign language overcomes national barriers and provided pictures of people signing to support her argument.

Criterion F: application of analytical and evaluative skills appropriate to the subject

Elements in both the Literature or the Language and Literature course should prepare students in terms of how to analyze film, games, advertisements and other sources they can choose to write about.

Some examiners remarked that papers on visual advertising were weak; students mostly simply described what they saw in the advertisement.

Some essays used resources whose authenticity and quality can be questionable - and where Category 3 essays took their examples simply out of textbooks or from a website, these were seriously hampered by the failure to provide the necessary context for the serious study of the word and/or image.

Criterion G: use of language appropriate to the subject

It is important that candidates are able to use the critical terms appropriate to the respective media: in this respect, analysis of speeches was often very successful where candidates recognized that language has its own lexis and/or had been introduced to the skills of rhetorical analysis, for example. The "how" of the question needs to be specifically dealt with in terms of language techniques used in the text(s) under discussion.

Criterion I: formal presentation

New for this session comes a real meaning to presentation of illustrative material. Layout and presentation of material being analyzed in a Category 3 essay needs thoughtful attention.

Language essays in the main required the inclusion of the original texts for an examiner to make sense of the discussion – failing to include these was the largest and most problematic omission for the examiner in terms of reaching a fair assessment of the quality of these essays. It is necessary, therefore, to give a full bibliography / list of sources used, in order to allow the examiner to read, view and/or assess the content the original material. In terms of advertisements, a clearly reproduced colour copy of such texts is essential. Where students had based the essay on TV or film some candidates gave e.g. the YouTube reference for Barack Obama's speeches or the web source for an online documentary such as the KONY 2012 campaign.

Recommendations and guidance for the teaching of future candidates

The comments which follow apply to essays submitted in all three Categories.

Some very useful completed supervisor's reports were seen this session and these aided in the holistic marking of the essay – there was often a lot of sound background information included, especially in terms of the history of the essay and how this had evolved.

The quality of the supervision has a clear bearing on the quality of the essay: arguably, many candidates would have been capable of scoring another 4 or 5 marks if their supervisor had been more proactive. Supervisors could especially

- do more to help students as part of their general training in research methodology in identifying 'good' scholarly information on the internet and being more discerning in their treatment of such source material. A number of examiners noted that students continue to use poor internet sources and that they often fail to respond critically to those sources. Over-reliance on internet sites of dubious quality should therefore be discouraged.

- fill in the cover sheet of the Extended Essay with their comments, especially in schools where the viva voce is held. Such comments often help to reinforce the examiner's own assessment of the essay. However, such comments, in order to be of value to an examiner, do need to be honest. Fulsome phrases such as "(she) has grown as a writer during this experience", or "This essay was a joy to read" (where the mark awarded was low....) are not helpful and give no real insight into how straightforward or difficult the task had been for the student.

Changes to supervisors (occasionally multiple in the lifetime of the essay production) should be avoided wherever possible – it was clear that such changes had a detrimental effect on the quality of the work submitted.

Many centres now routinely ask for the essays to be authenticated on Turnitin.com; whether or not schools use "Turnitin" or similar sites, candidates should be aware that examiners will Google suspect material and report it accordingly to the IB. They are advised to be honest and straightforward in citing sources, whether or not actual quotations are used.

There are still some very short essays – a few of which were barely over 2,000 words. Candidates should also be aware that in general essays under (say) 3,300 words are almost always self-penalizing as they fail to go into sufficient detail – especially where the topic of the RQ is a complex one – and that they could have used the "spare" word count to give more examples or quotations from the text, at the very least.

As always, a few essays exceeded the word limit or (in Categories 1 and 2) dealt only with works in translation and candidates need to be aware of the fact that where this occurs, there are only ceilinged marks available for certain criteria.

Finally, as per the examination instructions, the category of the essay should be clearly stated both on the front cover of the essay and the title page. It is important that the essay be directed towards the specific requirements and restrictions of the selected Category and not just vaguely positioned in a "literary" area.